

The real face of Mzansi families

 By [Nicole Shapiro](#)

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The importance of family for marketers and brand managers is undisputed. They are our bread and butter; from the life policy that leaves a lasting legacy for loved ones to the frozen vegetables we want on their dinner tables...

But, has our concept of family kept pace with the changes that have shaped society, so that the propositions we develop and the communication we send out to market maintained their relevance?

The dictionary definition of family is 'a group consisting of two parents and their children living together as a unit'.



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Yup, that's a little outdated to say the least. In fact, today's dynamics are far more complicated and - in a world where hyper relevance trumps all - marketers have to take note and act.

Consider the following figures and statistics (Source: Eighty20; Fact-A-Day; AMPS):

- In South Africa, 33% of black households with children are single-parent families. For coloured households it is 22%, 13% for white and 8% for Indian.
- There are an estimated 3.7 million orphaned children in South Africa, increasing by 11% a year since 2002.
- 21% of single (never married) men say they have young or unmarried children of their own. For single women this proportion is 51%.
- 54% of children (aged 0-17) say that their father is not part of their household.
- 41% of South African migrant workers return home at six-monthly or yearly intervals.

The numbers paint a vivid picture of the diverse and 'unconventional' South African family landscape, which suggested marketers would do well to ditch the model dictionary definition as a reference point in favour of relevance.

Yet, to do so is incredibly tricky, the truth is a very difficult pill to swallow. It's less complicated for us to depict the happy nuclear family eating sandwiches together around a table, rather than the glum scenario of children living with their grandmother because both their parents have died of Aids.

Brands can, however, get the balance right by being brave, being mindful and being authentic.

Be brave

Sometimes we just need to take a chance and showcase that 'elephant in the room'. Consider the recent Kellogg's [#FamilyMornings campaign](#), for example. In this campaign, South African actor and single dad Hlomla Dandala acknowledges how breakfast with his family has changed over the last few years. Not only is the idea relevant, but its execution is aspirational and positive.

Be mindful

The diverse nature of South African family dynamics, together with our Constitution's progressive attitude towards human rights, means that we as marketers (and people in business) simply cannot afford to make assumptions, let alone 'hard code' our consumer view.

So, consider how your brand experience should be geared for the changing family dynamic in South Africa. For example, a few years ago, a gay colleague of mine struggled to complete an application for a financial product when his long-term partner's identity number couldn't be entered into the 'spouse' field because this was only reserved for someone of the opposite sex.

Those responsible for designing the customer experience must appreciate the different types of consumers in South Africa and allow their systems to cater to these; be they single-moms, granny-headed households, sibling/parent roles, absent parent families, gay parents, mixed-race families, adopted and foster families and other 'family typologies'. Without this understanding, we're setting ourselves up for market irrelevance.

An example of a brand that's being mindful of South African family dynamics is insurance company, Assupol. Understanding that many South Africans are expected to provide beyond their immediate family, Assupol gives its clients the option to add cover for extended family members.

Be authentic

The facts may highlight that the 'nuclear family' is not always be relevant in a South African context and should therefore not be a default vision for marketers.

However, trying too hard to be 'real' isn't the answer either, as the recent communication for a local restaurant chain featuring a smiling, 'happy-clappy' mixed-race family showed. This felt forced, too politically correct, contrived and inauthentic, despite depicting a real-life South African scenario.

Simply checking the boxes for adequate representation is not enough - the power lies in the execution. South Africans have a great knack for sniffing out things that are inauthentic, and steer clear of anything that's not up to a promise of 'genuine'.

In conclusion, tapping into the family unit is a powerful tool for marketers. However, the evidence presented shows that the use of family in marketing and branding communications is not clear cut with guaranteed success. To unlock the power of the 'family', marketers need to truly understand the dynamics of families in South Africa inside and out, and bring this understanding to life in every single customer touch point.

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